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ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 HA-05 MCT-01 CIAE-00 DODE-00
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R 201859Z JAN 78
FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4210
INFO AMEMBASSY ASUNCION
AMEMBASSY BRASILIA
AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BUENOS AIRES 0482

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: SHUM, PINS, AR
SUBJECT: DISAPPEARANCE OF FRENCH NUNS AND MOTHERS' GROUP SUPPORTERS

REF: (A) 77 BUENOS AIRES 9420 (NOTAL) (B) 77 BUENOS AIRES 9715 (C) 77 BUENOS AIRES 9763 (D) 77 BUENOS AIRES 9523 (NOTAL)

SUMMARY: WE HAVE TRIED HARD TO CLARIFY THE CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TWO FRENCHNUNS AND SOME 11 OTHER ARGENTIME CIT'ZENS IN A SERIES OF ABDUCTIONS DECEMBER 8-10. OUR FINDINGS ARE CONTRADICTORY AND INCONCLUSIVE, AND THE FACT REMAINS THAT AT THIS WRITING WE HAVE NO SURE KNOWLEDGE REGARDING THE NUNS' ABDUCTORS OR THEIR PRESENT WHEREABOUTS. OUR SOURCES GENERALLY AGREE THAT THE OPERATION WAS CARRIED OUT BY SOME ARM OF THE SECURITY FORCES, BUT WHICH SPECIFIC GROUP AND THE LEVEL OF RESPONSIBILITY IS UNCLEAR. THE SUPPOSED MONTONERO NOTE CLAIMING
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RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ABDUCTION HAS BEEN GENERALLY

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PORTIONS DENIED AS INDICATED

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DISCOUNTED AND THE GOVERNMENT'S FAILURE TO FOLLOW UP OR PUBLICLY PLAY THAT LEAD INDICATES THAT NOT EVEN GOA IS SERIOUSLY CONVINCED OF MONTONERO INVOLVEMENT.
END SUMMARY

1. THE EMBASSY HAS MADE CONSIDERABLE EFFORT TO CLARIFY THE CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TWO FRENCH NUNS AND SEVERAL OTHER ARGENTINE CITIZENS IN A SERIES OF RELATED ABDUCTIONS DURING DECEMBER. THE SINGLE ASPECT OF THE CASE ON WHICH THERE IS GENERAL AGREEMENT IS THAT THE OPERATIONS WERE PROBABLY CARRIED OUT BY SECURITY FORCES AND THAT THOSE PERSONS RESPONSIBLE AND KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT THE CASE ARE GUARDING THEIR INFORMATION VERY CLOSELY.

2. THE QUESTION OF WHICH GROUP AND EVEN OF WHICH BRANCH OF THE SECURITY FORCES--AND AT WHAT LEVEL--MIGHT BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ABDUCTIONS REMAINS UNCLEAR. ALL THREE MILITARY SERVICES AND THE POLICE DENY--APPARENTLY EVEN TO THEIR BOSSES THE TOP SERCICE COMMANDERS--HAVING ANY RESPONSIBILITY OR INFORMATION ON THE CASE. ABSENCE OF KNOWLEDGE IS THE OFFICIAL STANCE OF THE ARGENTINE GOVERNMENT. REPORTEDLY, GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP--AT VERY LEAST PRESIDENT VIDELA--IS SERIOUSLY CONCERNED ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NUNS' DISAPPEARANCE, AND WORD HAS GONE OUT FROM TOP LEVELS IN FEDERAL POLICE AND THE ARMY TO LOCATE THE NUNS AND "COUGH THEM UP" IF FOUND. THE APPARENT LACK OF ANY PUBLISHABLE RESPONSE IS TAKEN BY SOME SOURCES AS EVIDENCE THAT THE ABDUCTED PERSONS ARE NOT BEING HELD BY THE FEDERAL POLICE AND PROBABLY NOT THE ARMY--IT BEING ASSUMED THAT VIDELA HAS CLOUT WITH THESE GROUPS SUFFICIENT

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TO FORCE ONE OR ANOTHER TO REVEAL ITS HAND. EXPRESSION TO THIS BELIEF CLEARLY IMPLIES THAT IT WAS THE NAVY WHICH PULLED OFF THE ABDUCTIONS, BUT THIS IS LEFT UNSAID EXCEPT DURING MOST CONFIDENTIAL AND INTIMATE CONVERSATIONS.

3. MOST SOURCES STRONGLY DENY THAT THE FEDERAL POLICE HERE IN ANY WAY INVOLVED.
RELATIVES OF THE DISAPPEARED PERSONS CLAIM NEVERTHELESS THAT THE KIDNAPPERS SHOWED POLICE CREDENTIALS AND THAT ONE OF THE DETAINEES MANAGED TO SEND A MESSAGE TO HIS FAMILY THROUGH

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A PRISONER SUBSEQUENTLY RELEASED THAT HE WAS BEING HELD IN FEDERAL POLICE HEADQUARTERS (SEE BUENOS AIRES 9715). IT IS ALSO APPARENT THAT THE KIDNAPPERS WERE FREE TO OPERATE IN CONSIDERABLE NUMBER IN A DOWNTOWN CHURCH SQUARE WITHOUT ANY INTERFERENCE FROM REGULAR POLICE IN THE AREA.

4. THERE IS CONSIDERABLE DISPUTE AND A SPECTRUM OF THEORY WHETHER THE ABDUCTORS WERE SOME LOW-LEVEL GROUP ACTING ON ITS OWN OR WHETHER THE OPERATION WAS AUTHORIZED BY OR SUBSEQUENTLY BROUGHT TO THE ATTENTION OF THOSE AT A HIGHER LEVEL. THE FRENCH EMBASSY'S MILITARY ATTACHE HAS STATED CONFIDENTIALLY THAT HE DOES NOT BELIEVE THAT THE TOP LEVELS OF THE THREE SERVICES CAN POSSIBLY BE IMPLICATED IN THE CASE. YET SOME SOURCES CLAIM IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR THE ARMY OR ANY ELEMENT OF THE ARMY TO HAVE COMMITTED THE OPERATION WITHOUT THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF, PRESIDENT VIDELA, KNOWING OF IT WITHIN A DAY. THOSE WHO DEFEND THE ARMY HINT THAT THE NAVY MAY HAVE ABDUCTED THE NUNS IN ORDER TO EMBARRASS THE VIDELA GOVERNMENT AND UNDERMINE HIS "PEACE BY CHRISTMAS" INITIATIVE (IF, IN FACT, THERE EVER WAS ONE). HIGH-LEVEL NAVY SOURCES DECLEARE THAT THE TOP NAVY HIERARCHY IS IN FIRM CONTROL AND THAT IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR ANYONE IN THE NAVY TO ACT COMPLETELY ON HIS OWN AUTHORITY. THIS DISCOUNTS THE POSSIBILITY THAT SOME "OUT OF CONTROL"
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NAVY GROUP AUTHORED THE ABDUCTIONS. ADMIRAL MASSERA HIMSELF OBLIQUELY BLAMED THE ARMY AS THE SERVICE MOST CAPABLE OF SUCH A MUDDLED, ILL-JUDGED CAPER AS THIS ONE. (SEE BUENOS AIRES 9600). THE AIR FORCE IS GENERALLY DISCOUNTED AS NOT HAVING THE CAPABILITY OR MOTIVE TO HAVE AUTHORED THE OPERATION.

5. ONE THEORY IS THAT SECURITY FORCES--AFFILIATION UNKNOWN--WERE SIMPLY GOING ABOUT THEIR BUSINESS OF ROUNDING UP SUSPECTED SUBVERSIVES AND/OR TROUBLEMAKERS WITHOUT SPECIAL CONSIDERATION TO THE INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SENSITIVITY OF THE NUNS AND THE MOTHERS GROUP SUPPORTERS. (COMMENT: SEVERAL ARGENTINE SOURCES HAVE REFERRED TO THE NUNS' ORDER AS BEING LEFTIST OR EVEN "COMMUNIST.") ONCE THESE FORCES DISCOVERED THEY HAD TWO HOT POTATOES ON THEIR HANDS--THE NUNS AND A BARRAGE OF ADVERSE PUBLICITY AND PRESSURE FROM ABROAD--THE ARMY (POSSIBLY AT THE LEVEL OF THE FIRST CORPS COMMANDER) CONCEIVED THE ABORTIVE "MONTONERO LETTER PLOY" (SEE BUENOS AIRES 9763). AN EXTENSION OF THIS THEORY HAS IT
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THAT THE PRESIDENCY DID BECOME AWARE OF THE FACTS, AT SOME POINT, BUT FOUND THE INFORMATION SO MONSTROUS AND

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EMBARRASSING THAT IT BELIEVED IT HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO STONEWALL ALL THE WAY. (THIS THEORY OF COURSE HAS GRIM IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ABDUCTED PERSONS, SINCE THE EASIEST COURSE MIGHT BE TO LIQUIDATE THE ABDUCTED GROUP AND HIDE THE EVIDENCE.)

6. A VARIANT OF THE ABOVE THEORY WAS INFORMATION WHICH CAME FROM A WELL-KNOWN AMERICAN BUSINESSMAN WHO EMPLOYS ARMY INTELLIGENCE OFFICERS AS MOONLIGHTING NIGHT TIME SECURITY WATCHMEN. THESE GUARDS CLAIMED TO HAVE POSITIVE KNOWLEDGE THAT A GROUP OF SECURITY OFFICERS PICKED UP THE NUNS NOT ONLY BECAUSE THEY BELIEVED THE NUNS TO BE LEFTISTS BUT ALSO TO SIGNAL THEIR DISSATISFACTION WITH VIDELA'S "SOFT POLICY" ON SUBVERSION. IN THIS VARIANT, IT WAS ALSO BELIEVED THAT THE PRESIDENT KNOWS OF THE DEED BUT LACKS THE POWER OR THE DETERMINATION TO MOVE AGAINST THOSE GUILTY.

7. IN THIS PLETHORA OF POSSIBILITIES AND THEORIES, THE ONE THAT SEEMS THE LEAST PLAUSIBLE IS THAT WHICH SUGGESTS MONTONERO INVOLVEMENT. IN THEIR DETERIORATED STATE AT PRESENT, IT IS UNLIKELY THE MONTONEROS STILL POSSESS THE LOGISTICAL CAPABILITY TO HAVE ABDUCTED AND BE HOLDING THE NUNS AND SOME 11 OTHER ARGENTINES. THE FACT THAT GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS THEMSELVES HAVE FAILED TO FOLLOW UP OR TO PUBLICLY PLAY THAT LEAD INDICATES NOT ONLY THAT THEY DON'T BELIEVE IT BUT THAT THEY DON'T THINK IT WILL "FLY". (ALTHOUGH, AS TIME PASSES AND THE GOVERNMENT'S SILENCE BECOMES UNTENABLE, SOME MILITARY OFFICERS HAVE SHOWN AN INCLINATION TO REFLOAT THE MONTONERO ARGUMENT--WHEN THEY ARE NOT HINTING AT THE

INVOLVEMENT OF SOME RIVAL MILITARY SERVICE.)

8. THE ONE ARGUMENT NOT TOUCHED THUS FAR IS THAT OF "CUI BONO." IN THE MUDDLED SITUATION WE FACE HERE PERCEPTIONS OF "BENEFIT" TO ONE PARTY OR ANOTHER MAY SEEM BIZARRE. THERE COULD EVEN BE REASON TO SUSPECT MONTONERO INVOLVEMENT ON THIS BASIS, FOR IF IN FACT ONE AIM OF THAT MOVEMENT IS TO DISCREDIT THE ARGENTINE GOVERNMENT BEFORE THE WORLD THEN THE NUNS' ABDUCTIONS AND THOSE OF THEIR ASSOCIATES PERFORMS THIS ADMIRABLY. IF WE CAN PROPOSE THAT ADMIRAL MASSERA'S POLITICAL

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AMBITIONS AND DISLIKE FOR VIDELA OUTSTRIP HIS SENSE OF LOYALTY TO THE JUNTA OF WHICH HE IS MEMBER AND ARGENTINA'S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE, THEN THE ABDUCTIONS ARE WELL MADE FOR THE ADMIRAL'S BENEFIT. IN THESE SAME "CUI BONO" ARGUMENTS WE CANNOT EVEN DISMISS THE SHORTSIGHTED (IN OUR OPINION) VIEW OF A SECURITY SERVICE, WHICH SEES ITS MISSION THE EXTIRPATION OF SUBVERSION IN ALL ITS FORMS. TO PERSONS OF THIS MIND THE GOVERNMENT'S OWN DISCOMFITURE IS NOT SO IMPORTANT AS THERE BEING ONE LESS "SUBVERSIVE" NUCLEUS. ABOUT THE ONLY PERSONS WHO IN NO WAY CAN BENEFIT FROM THE ABDUCTIONS APPEAR TO BE VIDELA HIMSELF AND THOSE ARMY GENERALS--VIOLA AND HARGUINDEGUY, FOR EXAMPLE--HIGH IN GOVERNMENT AND CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH VIDELA'S COMPETENCE AND FATE.

9. WE LEARNED [redacted] THAT THE PAPAL NUNCIO RECEIVED A REPLY TO HIS OFFICIAL INQUIRY FROM INTERIOR MINISTER HARGUINDEGUY EARLY THIS WEEK TO THE EFFECT THAT DESPITE AN "EXHAUSTIVE SEARCH" GOA HAS NO INFORMATION ON WHAT HAPPENED TO THE NUNS. [redacted] SAID THAT BY THE TONE OF THE LETTERS HE BELIEVES MINISTER OF INTERIOR HARGUINDEGUY IS SUGGESTING THAT THE CASE SHOULD BE CONSIDERED CLOSED. ACCORDING TO TODAY'S PRESS (JANUARY 20), ARGENTINE AMBASSADOR ANCHORENA RECENTLY TOLD THE FRENCH FOREIGN MINISTRY THAT VIDELA'S

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ANSWER TO GISCARD D'ESTAING'S PERSONAL LETTER ON THE NUNS WOULD BE SOON FORTHCOMING. THE ARGENTINE DEMARCHE ALSO INDICATED THAT HARGUINDEGUY HAD SENT A LETTER TO FRENCH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY PRESIDENT FAURE EXPLAINING MEASURES TAKEN TO CLEAR UP THE AFFAIR. WE SUPPOSE THAT HARGUINDEGUY'S RESPONSE TO WAS FAURE IN THE VEIN OF HIS LETTER TO THE NUNCIO.

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